

"They Were As Sheep Not Having a Shepherd"

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Early or late in the ministry of our blessed Lord, He displayed the essential characteristics of a shepherd. As multitudes swarmed about Him through the day, or as men came to Him privately by night, He was always looking at them through the eyes of a shepherd. And small wonder, for as the Divine Shepherd He came to give, to guide, and to guard the sheep. There was ever before Him the vision of milling multitudes of people who were as sheep without a shepherd.

Centuries before, God had given to the people a shepherd in the person of Moses. As his life and ministry were fast drawing to a close, his most insistent yearning was for someone, God appointed, to take up the task where he must lay it down, and carry on. He voiced this yearning in a great prayer, "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, which may go out before them, and which may go in before them, and which may lead them out, and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd (Num. 27:16, 17).

A thousand years passed by, and many there were who took up where Moses had been compelled to lay down his task. The type of shepherds at the time of Ezekiel was altogether different from that first great shepherd, Moses. "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them. And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered" (Ezek. 34:2-5).

After fulfilling in His public ministry the functions of a shepherd, and even though intending to carry on this ministry from His exalted place in the heavens, still,

almost the final charge Christ gave, was that of a shepherding commission. Though there was a sense in which He delivered this to Peter personally, yet there is another sense in which all that He said was meant for all His disciples, and in turn, all those since who have experienced the call to some such ministry. Magnificently and marvelously He opened up to His own the necessary functions and the consequent responsibilities of the shepherd. This was at the hour of devotion one morning just following breakfast. With the tenderness of a shepherd He taught a sheep the need for sympathy with the sheep, the need for sovereignty over the sheep, the need for sacrifice for the sheep (John 21:15-17).

1. *Sympathy with the sheep* is necessary for the successful shepherding of sheep (15). Twice it is affirmed of Jesus that He had compassion upon the multitude for He saw them as sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34). Compassion or sympathy is that deep, inner feeling along with the sheep. It does not only recognize urgent need, but it compels the shepherd to supply the need.

The command to Peter, "Feed my lambs," meant that very thing. By the word "lambs" Christ was emphasizing limitation, spiritual limitation in every way: in stature, strength, stability. But where the "lambs" are little, the shepherd is great, and he must provide for the sheep. Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20), and His sympathy for the sheep is deep. Because He is great, there was then, and is now, no detail too small for Him to consider. And He wants the same thing in every under-shepherd.

But the channel for achievement is not by looking at the sheep, but by loving the Great Shepherd. "Lovest thou me?" is the question which faces every one who would be a shepherd.

2. *Sovereignty over the sheep* is also necessary for successful shepherding of the sheep (16). As the Chief Shepherd (I Pet. 5:4) while among men, and as the one in the future who will rule the nations, He displays this important quality.

The command to Peter, "Feed my sheep," is a charge
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to exercise such rule over the flock of God. The word "feed" differs from the word used in verses 15 and 17. It rather sets forth the entire office of the shepherd with emphasis upon rulership. The same word used in Matthew 2:6 and Revelation 19:15 and rendered "rule" clearly distinguishes this idea. Jesus saw the sheep straggling, straying, scattering; they were faltering, failing, falling in the way for want of a shepherd. So with that same deep yearning for the sheep He commissions to sovereignty.

But the avenue of achievement is not to be found in a mere exercise of authority, nor in a mere recognition of need in the sheep. It can be realized only by loving the Chief Shepherd. For that reason, once again Christ asks Peter, "Lovest thou me?" As one comes to love Christ, he is mysteriously equipped with the quality of sovereignty and the way to exercise it.

3. *Sacrifice for the sheep* is basic for successful shepherding of the sheep (17). Though there must be sympathy for the sheep, it falls short of the fundamental need. And though there must be sovereignty exercised by the shepherd, there can be no real shepherd without sacrifice.

The command to Peter, "Feed my sheep," emphasizes this final and foremost quality in shepherding. Though Christ used the word "feed" in verse 15, He emphasized "lambs." Though He emphasized the word "feed" in verse 16, it was another word. Now He returns to the word of verse 15 for the purpose of emphasizing the most important aspect of the ministry of a shepherd. It is that of feeding the flock, even to the point of sacrifice. And "the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). False ecclesiasticism is always devoid of true feeding of the flock.

Again, it is made clear from the text that the channel through which one succeeds to the place of the true shepherd is by loving the Good Shepherd. "Lovest thou me?" That is the question. If that question can be answered in the affirmative, then there is no doubt about the ministry of that shepherd. He will be sure to follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, and feed the sheep with the truth even though it may mean loss of position, power, prominence, and perhaps, as in the case of Christ, and many others, life itself.

Let those who are under-shepherds, or aspire to be such, search their own hearts to see whether they possess these necessary qualities of sympathy, sovereignty, sacrifice.